The two volumes that make up the Syntopicon comprise a distinctive kind of index. The term “syntopicon” means a collection of topics. In these two volumes there are nearly 3,000 topics parceled out among 102 ideas. The purpose of these volumes is to provide a subject-matter index to writings included in the Great Books of the Western World. Underlying the creation of the Syntopicon is the conviction that the books in this set have an overall unity in the discussion of common themes and problems. Such a unity exists because all of the books belong to the western tradition.
The lines along which a syntopical reading of the Great Books can be done are the main lines of the continuous discussion that runs through the thirty centuries of western civilization. This great conversation across the ages is the living organism whose structure the Syntopicon tries to articulate. It tries to show the many strands of this conversation between the greatest minds of western civilization on the themes which have concerned people in every epoch and which cover the whole range of humanity's speculative inquiries and practical interests. To the extent it succeeds, it reveals the unity and continuity of the west.

The 102 ideas. The reader must be informed that the 102 ideas, along with their topics, were not imposed on the Great Books. They were, rather, sorted out by an intensive reading and rereading of the books by a sizable staff of scholars. There was, in other words, no attempt on the part of the editors to predigest or simplify the information available in this set. The intent was only to provide anyone interested in ideas a ready access to the set. Once it was decided to create an idea index, no alternative indexing style was possible. The use of the ideas demanded a topical and subtopical outline form to which references could be appended.

Why 102 ideas instead of an even 90, 100, or no? The present 102 is no magic number, nor is it intended to suggest that there are only that many ideas in the history of western thought. The presence of the Inventory of Terms, containing about 2,000 topic suggestions and concepts, clearly indicates otherwise. The number 102 represents only an editorial judgment made in the interest of constructing the Syntopicon, after careful and judicious reading of the books themselves—and with a general consensus about the major motifs of western society. It would have been possible, considering the contents of the books in the set, to have as few as 90 ideas or as many as 110.

The arrangement of the Syntopicon. The Syntopicon consists of three main parts: the 102 idea-chapters, a Bibliography of Additional Readings, and an Inventory of Terms. The 102 chapters and the Inventory of Terms, taken together, are the tools the reader uses to participate in the great conversation across the centuries within the context of each idea.

The 102 chapters comprise the heart (and bulk) of the Syntopicon. Each chapter has five parts: an introductory essay; an outline of topics; references to relevant works in the Great Books; cross-references to other chapters; and a list of additional readings.

The introductory essay defines the nature and scope of the idea and serves as a guide to its topics. It provides a foretaste of the great conversation contained in the passages cited in the reference section. Immediately after the introductory essay there is the Outline of Topics, which exhibits the internal structure of the idea. The topics are the basic, elementary units of the Syntopicon. The average number of topics in a chapter is thirty, but the
actual number varies from as few as six topics (Fate) to as many as seventy-three (God).

In the References the Outline of Topics is repeated, this time including the relevant citations for Great Books authors and works. References are arranged in the order in which the authors appear in the set, from Volume 3 to Volume 60. Examining the materials in chronological order enables the reader to follow the actual development of thought on a topic. References to the Bible, when present, are always placed first. The Bible is not included as part of the set, since there is no definitive edition acceptable to everyone.

Readers will notice that in some chapters a few topics contain no references. These topics serve as headings for other topics grouped analytically under them. The main topic, in other words, serves as a peg on which to hang the subtopics. Examples of such “open” topics can be found in the outlines on Being (8. Being and knowledge), Quantity (5. Physical quantities), and State (2. The general theory of the state).

The Cross-References make up the fourth part of each chapter. They direct readers to other chapters in which similar, or related, topics are considered. By relating the topics of one chapter to those of other chapters, the Cross-References show the interconnection of the ideas.

The last segment of each chapter is the list of Additional Readings. Large and diverse as the number of works in the Great Books is, they do not exhaust the number of authors or books that have made signal contributions to the ideas of western civilization. The Additional Readings provide a listing of other works on each idea. Each list is divided into two sections. The first group consists of works written by authors represented in the Great Books. The second group lists works by other authors. In both lists the authors are in a general chronological order. The reader will note that every attempt has been made to bring the lists of Additional Readings as up-to-date as possible, including some books published in 1990. By contrast, the latest copyright date of the most recent 20th-century works included in the set is about 1950. (The reasons for this are explained in the book The Great Conversation.)

For the convenience of the reader, the authors and titles in all 102 lists are compiled into a single alphabetical list in the Bibliography of Additional Readings in the second volume of the Syntopicon. The Bibliography provides authors’ full names, complete book titles, and dates of publication.

The Inventory of Terms, an alphabetically arranged glossary at the end of Volume 2, cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Readers who want only to study a specific idea can simply turn to it, since the ideas are arranged alphabetically from Angel to World. But the number of ideas is only 102, while the Inventory of Terms offers about 2,000 other concepts on which to draw. Suppose, therefore, that a reader wants to study a topic that is not the name of one of the ideas—imperialism,
ecology, quantum mechanics, or the generation gap, for example. Few people have the patience to pore through hundreds of topics in many outlines. The most direct approach is to go directly to the Inventory of Terms. There, the student of imperialism will be referred to more than a half-dozen idea outlines. Because all of the 102 ideas have been included in the list, the Inventory of Terms is also quite useful for expanding the research possibilities for each of the ideas. None of the ideas stands as an isolated, self-contained entity. Many interrelationships exist between them: between Citizen, Constitution, Democracy, Government, and State, for instance; or between God, Prophecy, Religion, Sin, and Theology. By consulting the Inventory of Terms, the reader can see immediately how wide-ranging a particular idea is. The inventory is thus an aid in ascertaining the contexts within which an idea can be studied.

Ways of using the Syntopicon. A perusal of the Syntopicon will make evident the various ways it can be used. At the simplest level, a reader can take one topic within one outline (Science 2a. The relation between science and religion, for example) and look up the references to it. A slightly broader range of interest may lead a reader to do research on a major topic that has several subtopics: Liberty 1., Natural freedom and political liberty, is a good example, since the subject has eight subtopics. Some individuals may be zealous enough to do research on a whole idea, by looking up all the references to all the topics in it. Readers who feel ready to plunge right into the reference sections of the Syntopicon would do well to familiarize themselves with the entire outline in which they intend to work. The outlines, devoid of references, are printed immediately following the essays. Familiarity with the whole outline will assure that the researcher is using the right topic within the correct idea.

What if the location of the topic is unknown? This is when the Inventory of Terms comes in handy. One may want to see what the Great Books authors have to say about a very timely issue—the environment. Since "environment" is not one of the 102 ideas, it is necessary to consult the Inventory first. Having found the word "environment" in the Inventory, the reader is confronted with half a dozen or more different idea names, some with more than one topic listed. Which is the right one? The only way to be sure is to check the outlines and topics listed. Having looked at the relevant outlines, the most promising one for research is Life and Death 4., The biological economy in ecological systems. It is the broadest in scope of the similar topics related to the environment. But consulting the other outlines has not been a waste of time. The topics found there suggest how research on the environment may be filled out. Indeed, the reader may get a deeper perspective on the issue by seeing how it is treated under different ideas.

The Inventory of Terms is also useful for finding synonyms and cognate terms. For instance, the word "ecology" is closely related to environment. As it happens, the topics suggested for ecology are almost the same ones listed after environment in the Inventory. Life and Death 4., The biological economy in ecological systems, is
cited in both places, leading us to conclude it is the most appropriate topic for
starting the research.

Looking for the proper environmental topic was instructive. It indicated the extent
to which single issues can become multifaceted and thus be treated in different
contexts. Look, for instance, at the term education in the Inventory. It is followed
by a list of about two-dozen ideas and even more topics. It is immediately obvious
that education can be studied in itself as an idea; but it can also be investigated
under such rubrics as: education for citizenship, the role of education in a
democracy, the educative function of law, and many more.
If contexts can be narrowed, they can also be widened. A really ambitious
researcher may wish to construct a hierarchy of ideas on which to work. Taking
State as the overarching theme, the following ideas become the objects of study:
Aristocracy, Citizen, Constitution, Democracy, Government, Law, Liberty,
Monarchy, Oligarchy, Punishment, Slavery, Tyranny and Despotism, War and
Peace, and Wealth. After researching an idea as broad as State or a more narrowly
defined topic, the reader may want to consult the Cross-References printed after
the reference sections in a given outline. These point to associated topics in other
outlines.

Examples of Syntopicon use. Having settled on the environment as a research
topic, we turn to the reference section of Chapter 48: Life and Death, to locate topic
4., The biological economy in ecological systems. There we find references by
volume, author, and page numbers. In this case, the references range from
Herodotus in the 5th century b.c. to such recent authors as Anton Chekhov, Alfred
North Whitehead, and C. H. Waddington. Should we decide to look up all the
references, these are the authors we shall be consulting: Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle,
Hippocrates, Galen, Lucretius, Plotinus, Aquinas, Galileo, Pascal, Montesquieu,
Rousseau, Smith, Kant, Melville, Darwin, Ibsen, Whitehead, Waddington, Chekhov.
After reading these selections, turn to the Cross-References for additional material.
In this case there is only one cross-reference relevant to the environment: Animal
11b., The relation between the living organism and its environment. The
abundance of material found under this topic will add significantly to the material
gleaned from Life and Death 4.

Suppose we had done the more ambitious research project on State and its related
ideas, as described above. Had all the references been consulted, there would still
be much more material to be found. The Cross-References, in Chapter 90: State,
cite many topics from ideas that were not among the primary ones associated with
State. Among the many secondary topics associated with State are the following:
Animal id; Education 8a; Family 2a-2c; History 43(3); Labor 5-5d; Language 1;
Progress 4b; Religion 4-4b; and Science Ib(2).
It should be clear from the foregoing that the Great Books provide the opportunity
for virtually any kind of use, from the pure pleasure of reading to the most
intensive and detailed research.